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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 002584

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [KWBG](#) [MARR](#) [TU](#) [IS](#)  
SUBJECT: TURKEY: REENGAGING ISRAEL

REF: A. ANKARA 222  
[1](#)B. ANKARA 2193  
[1](#)C. ANKARA 2340

Classified By: POLCOUNS JANICE G.WEINER FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Turkey's relationship with Israel has reached a new and somewhat different equilibrium. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) government's occasional casual use of anti-Israeli rhetoric and rapprochement with Israel's arch enemies has caused the once warm friendship to cool a few degrees. Israeli officials tell us that, for the sake of the strategic partnership, the GOI has learned to ignore what they see as political pandering. Although high-level engagement in early 2007 promised warmer relations, both governments curtailed senior-level contact in the run-up to Turkey's July parliamentary elections so as not to draw Israel into the political fray. The Anti-Defamation League's August 1 statement regarding Armenian "genocide" and subsequent retraction reinforced for AKP leaders the value of Israel's friendship. Since then, both nations have reengaged, as evidenced by Foreign Minister Babacan's October 8 trip to Israel and a tentatively scheduled Peres visit to Ankara in mid-November. Should the Armenian genocide resolution (AGR) pass, however, it will be exceedingly difficult to control the damage to the relationship that will result from Turkish politicians turning Israel into a convenient scapegoat. End Summary.

WARM TIES CHILL...AND THAW

[1](#)2. (C) The warm rhetoric and close mil-mil relationship that characterized ties between Turkey and Israel in the 1990s have cooled somewhat since the second intifada and the 2002 election of the AKP(ref A). Israel has become an easy target for Turkish politicians hoping to score points with constituents who disapprove of GOI actions in Palestine and Lebanon. Israeli Embassy officials in Ankara tell us that Israelis have developed a thick skin and learned to overlook embarrassing political rhetoric for the sake of the greater strategic relationship. However, AKP's active engagement with Turkey's more unsavory neighbors, specifically Iran and Syria, has placed a new strain on the friendship.

[1](#)3. (C) At the beginning of 2007, bilateral relations seemed to be on the mend. Israeli PM Olmert, in Ankara on February 15 -- the first visit of an Israeli prime minister to Turkey since 2001 -- signaled his willingness to engage. In frank discussions with PM Erdogan, Olmert underscored the continued strength of the bilateral relationship and urged Turkey to work more closely with the U.S. Additionally, he accepted GOT offers to facilitate communication between Israel and its neighbors. Over the summer, the Turkish MFA claims, and

Israeli Embassy officials would not deny, the GOI requested Turkey's help in reaching out to Damascus to determine Syria's receptiveness to renewing talks.

#### THOUGH ECONOMIC AND MILITARY TIES REMAIN STRONG

¶4. (C) Turkey's already strong economic and trade relationship with Israel continues to grow, and has turned increasingly in Turkey's favor. During the first six months of 2007, bilateral trade between the two countries totaled USD 1.3 billion, almost a 25 percent increase over the first half of 2006. The Turkish and Israeli militaries also have begun to reengage. In June, Turkish military leaders leased unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) from Israeli Aerospace Industries to help combat PKK terrorists along the Iraq border. Following cancellations in the preceding two years, U.S., Turkish, and Israeli air and naval forces successfully completed the eighth annual search and rescue exercise Reliant Mermaid in August. Chief of the Turkish General Staff General Buyukanit will visit Israel the week of October 22.

#### POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT TOOK A TIME-OUT

¶5. (C) While economic ties remain resilient and military relations have picked up, there has been a hiatus in Turkish and Israeli political engagement in recent months. Reflecting both governments' desire that Israel not be dragged into Turkey's domestic political fray, bilateral engagement decreased in the run-up to Turkey's July 22 parliamentary elections. GOI Infrastructure Minister Ben Eliezer canceled his scheduled April visit to discuss the proposed oil, natural gas, and fresh water pipeline project.

ANKARA 00002584 002 OF 002

The strategy worked. Following the elections, relations picked up where they left off in April. PM Erdogan met President Peres on the margins of UNGA and Turkey's new FM Babacan visited Israel October 8. Minister Ben Eliezer has rescheduled his trip for October 23-25. Peres has tentatively scheduled a visit to Turkey for November 11-13. A FM Livni visit may be in the works as well.

#### AND THERE MAY BE AGR TROUBLE ON THE HORIZON

¶6. (C) The relationship is not out of the woods. Turks who view Israel positively are few and far between according to the German Marshall Fund's 2007 Transatlantic Trends public opinion survey. Turks expressing a positive opinion of Israel has dropped to five percent, down from 12 percent in 2006. GOT officials have also pressured the GOI to influence the American Jewish lobby to oppose congressional passage of an AGR. The Israeli DCM reports that a wide range of GOT officials openly warned her that Israel would be held partially responsible, should the AGR pass.

¶7. (C) Pressure increased when the U.S.-based Anti-Defamation League (ADL) released a statement on August 21, stating the events of 1915 constituted genocide (ref B). Within hours, PM Erdogan telephoned President Peres to solicit Israel's assistance in prevailing upon ADL leadership to retract the statement. After assuring Erdogan that Israel had not changed its policy of neutrality on the issue, Peres personally called ADL National Director Abraham Foxman. The result was a second statement that argued against a congressional resolution and urged Turkish-Armenian reconciliation through scholarly examination of the historical events.

#### BUT MUTUAL COMMITMENT TO MAINTAINING STRONG TIES REMAINS

¶8. (C) Peres, in a forward-leaning gesture to the newly elected GOT and President, went on the record in a September 1 interview with a Turkish daily, stating, "the mere fact that Turkey is maintaining relations with Israel is the best declaration about the nature of the (AKP) government." He

characterized President Gul as "a responsible man (who has) contributed positively to our relations" and concluded that "Israel is firm on its (AGR) position. For us, relations with Turkey are very important." When Israeli jets then violated Turkish airspace five days later, the GOT showed great restraint, urging all sides to avoid taking any actions that would escalate tensions (ref C). On the eve of the House Foreign Relations Committee's decision to send the AGR to the floor, President Peres and PM Olmert called Congressmen directly to lobby on behalf of Turkey against the resolution.

COMMENT:

19. (C) Officials in both nations recognize the strategic importance of the relationship. Thanks to careful damage control, the GOI and the Turkish MFA have managed to neutralize most incidents as they have emerged. The ADL statement appears to have shocked high-level AKP officials into realizing that the relationship cannot be taken for granted. The GOT also understands it cannot become a regional player without Israel's support. Israeli officials recognize Turkey's desire to demonstrate regional leadership and are willing occasionally to foster that by asking the Turks to play the role of a facilitator. In doing so, the GOI has raised the price of bad behavior. As AKP starts its second term, Israeli Embassy contacts say they will continue to look beyond occasional impetuousness on the part of Turkish politicians because they understand the benefits of an indebted Turkey over an embittered one. This pragmatism represents a maturation of the bilateral relationship. Passage of the AGR could, however, change the relationship's dynamics for the worse. End Comment.

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